

# FTC FACTS for Consumers

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FOR THE CONSUMER

FEDERAL TRADE COMMISSION

1-877-FTC-HELP

## Test Your Supplement Savvy



**A**dvertised throughout the media, displayed in grocery stores and pharmacies, and promoted widely on the

Internet, dietary supplements look like just another consumer product on the shelf. But are they? Take this quiz to find out how much you know about using dietary supplements safely.



A supplement labeled “natural” means that it also is:

- A. mild
- B. without any risk of side effects
- C. safe to use with other medications
- D. none of the above



Since dietary supplements are so easily available – and don’t require a doctor’s prescription – they are much safer than drug products and can be used to self-treat illnesses without a health professional’s advice or supervision.

True or False



Testimonials in dietary supplement promotions give a good idea of the supplement’s benefits and safety because they’re based on firsthand accounts.

True or False

## Facts for Consumers

 **4** Many supplements have proven health benefits.

True or False

 **5** Before you start taking a dietary supplement, talk it over with a knowledgeable person like:

- A. your doctor or health professional
- B. your pharmacist
- C. a supplement salesperson
- D. a friend who takes them

## Answers

 **1** D. The term “natural” may suggest to consumers that the supplement is safe, especially when compared with prescription drugs that are known to have side effects. But natural is not necessarily safe. Although many supplements can be used safely by most people, other supplements, including some herbal products, can be dangerous. Aristolochic acid, which has been found in some traditional Chinese herbal remedies, has been linked to severe kidney disease. And the herb comfrey contains certain alkaloids that, when ingested, have been linked to serious, even fatal, liver damage. Animal studies suggest that the herb may cause cancer, too. Even certain vitamins can be toxic at high doses. And certain supplements have been found to interact with other medications in ways that could cause injury.

 **2** False.

Studies have shown that some herbal products interact with drugs and can have a wide range of effects. For example, St. John’s Wort can lower the effects of indinavir, a protease inhibitor for treating HIV. St. John’s Wort also may interfere with drugs used by organ transplant patients and drugs used to treat depression, seizures, and certain cancers. In addition, there are concerns that it may reduce the effectiveness of oral contraceptives. Garlic, ginkgo, danshen, and dong quai can cause blood to thin, which could cause serious problems for people on drugs like warfarin or aspirin. Dietary supplements are not required to go through the same pre-market government review for quality, safety, and efficacy as drug products. But that doesn’t mean they should be taken lightly — or without consulting your health care professional, especially if you have a medical condition or are taking other drugs.

 **3** False.

It’s unwise to judge a product’s efficacy or safety based only on testimonials. First, it is very difficult to verify the accuracy of the account: Some marketers may embellish or even make up testimonials to sell their product. Second, you can’t generalize one person’s experience to others. Anecdotes are not a substitute for valid science.

 **4** True.

Studies suggest that several popular supplements, including herbal products, may provide health benefits. For example, calcium can reduce the risk of osteoporosis, folic acid during pregnancy can prevent birth defects, and there is some evidence suggesting that St. John’s Wort may be helpful for some people with mild depression. Check out any health claims with a reliable source, such as the National Institutes of Health’s Office of Dietary Supplements, a public

health or scientific organization like the American Cancer Society or the Arthritis Foundation, and your health provider.



### A or B.

Talk to your doctor, pharmacist, or other health provider about any medicines you take, as well as any dietary supplements you're using or thinking about using. Though some doctors have limited knowledge of herbal products and other supplements, they have access to the most current research and can help monitor your condition to ensure that no problems develop or serious interactions occur. Retailers or marketers can be good sources of information about their products and their ingredients, but bear in mind that they have a financial interest in their products. If your doctor or pharmacist has a financial interest in the product, get a second, independent opinion.

For more information about the safe use of dietary supplements, visit the FTC's Virtual Health Treatments page at [ftc.gov/healthclaims](http://ftc.gov/healthclaims).

The FTC works for the consumer to prevent fraudulent, deceptive, and unfair business practices in the marketplace and to provide information to help consumers spot, stop, and avoid them. To file a complaint or to get free information on consumer issues, visit [ftc.gov](http://ftc.gov) or call toll-free, 1-877-FTC-HELP (1-877-382-4357); TTY: 1-866-653-4261. The FTC enters Internet, telemarketing, identity theft, and other fraud-related complaints into Consumer Sentinel, a secure, online database available to hundreds of civil and criminal law enforcement agencies in the U.S. and abroad.



# Facts for Consumers

The Federal Trade Commission (FTC) is the nation's consumer protection agency. Here are some tips from the FTC to help you be a more savvy consumer.

- 1. Know who you're dealing with.** Do business only with companies that clearly provide their name, street address, and phone number.
- 2. Protect your personal information.** Share credit card or other personal information only when buying from a company you know and trust.
- 3. Take your time.** Resist the urge to "act now." Most any offer that's good today will be good tomorrow, too.
- 4. Rate the risks.** Every potentially high-profit investment is a high-risk investment. That means you could lose your investment — all of it.
- 5. Read the small print.** Get all promises in writing and read all paperwork before making any payments or signing any contracts. Pay special attention to the small print.
- 6. "Free" means free.** Throw out any offer that says you have to pay to get a gift or a "free" gift. If something is free or a gift, you don't have to pay for it. Period.
- 7. Report fraud.** If you think you've been a victim of fraud, report it. It's one way to get even with a scam artist who cheated you. By reporting your complaint to 1-877-FTC-HELP or [ftc.gov](http://ftc.gov), you are providing important information to help law enforcement officials track down scam artists and stop them!

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Bureau of Consumer Protection  
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